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ABSTRACT

Discussed is the need for an interdisciplinary approach to bilingual special education with emphasis on the integration of the fields of bilingual education and special education. (IM)

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A Student's Reaction to Bilingual Special Education

Today's sensible approach to special education is interdisciplinary; it attempts to involve all the concerned professionals within the various supportive fields for the betterment of the child. This integration of services eliminates petty, time-consuming arguments over whose "domain" the child falls into; the time is better spent working together to help the total child with his individual needs.

An interdisciplinary approach has to involve the area of bilingual education, for those children whose native tongue is other than English and who can better function in the native language. In the United States there are hundreds of thousands of school-age children whose cultural background and home language are different from that which is used as the medium of instruction in the schools they attend.

In New York City, for example, about one-third of the children attending the public school system are of Puerto Rican descent, and speak Spanish at home. There are also sizeable and significant numbers of children of other language groups - Chinese, Italian, Haitian and Greek. The same general pattern is present in many urban areas, such as Chicago, Los Angeles, Miami, New Orleans, as well as many parts of the northeastern and southwestern states, although the language groups vary according to the region. (In Massachusetts, for example, there is a sizeable Portuguese-speaking community.)

In many of these areas, bilingual education, which has been growing rapidly in acceptance and implementation, has proved to be a viable means

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of instruction for "normal" children of different language backgrounds. The historical alternative for this child has often been tremendous frustration, with subsequent "dropping out". The alarming statistical rates of "drop-outs" among children of these various minority groups has led to court cases and legislation at the federal, state and city levels to fund bilingual programs in an effort to ameliorate the pre-existing situation. Unfortunately, thus far the thrust has been for "compensatory" rather than "enrichment" bilingual programs. The compensatory philosophy fosters the idea of using the child's native language for instruction only until he has learned sufficient English to get by. Then there is no further instruction offered to the child pertinent to his language and cultural background. This is known as the transitional program. The maintenance or enrichment program, on the other hand, strives to maintain and enrich the child's proficiency in the speaking, reading and writing of both languages, as well as an appreciation and respect for the two cultures.

Now, the first efforts are being made to transfer the bilingual philosophy to the area of special education. This seems like a logical progression, since the philosophy of special education promotes the idea of building on the individual strengths of the child to overcome his weaker areas.

A different-language child, even an exceptional different-language child, brings with him to school concepts and experiences formed within his specific linguistic and cultural background. To ignore this fact and proceed in the traditional monolingual (English), "foreign to the child" approach is to be insensitive to the needs and strengths of the individual child. This approach seems incongruent with the philosophy of specialized education; and yet, because of this approach, many wrongs have been committed.

Many different-language children have been diagnosed incorrectly as "exceptional children," or children with emotional or behavior problems simply because they could not relate to English language and culturally different tests measuring the intellectual, emotional, social and behavioral areas, or through the intervention of professionals insensitive to the different frame of reference of these children. In short, there is a definite break-down of communication.

On the other hand, there are different language children who do exhibit learning disorders and who are diagnosed correctly. However, the remediation effort is often inappropriate, following the traditional English language approach.

In other words, learning disabilities as well as learning abilities must be assessed and recognized. If the teacher does not speak the child's language, whose disability is it? Is a language difference to be conceived as a language disorder? Is a cultural difference to be conceived as a cultural deprivation? What is the impact of this kind of attitude by significant educational personnel on the language-different child? Does the teacher's expectation affect the child's positive or negative self-image?

Unfortunately, up until now a language difference has been thought of as the child's handicap. For the exceptional child, it has functioned as a double handicap. That is to say, his language difference was treated as a handicap, in addition to his real exceptionality.

This issue is now being faced and dealt with by the federal government and institutions of higher learning, in their training of special educators. Currently, three universities, facilitated by federal funds,

have begun to implement teacher-training programs in the field of bilingual special education. Fordham University's Special Education Program is one of the pioneers, and offers programs in bilingual special education with specializations in learning disabilities, mental retardation or emotional disorders. In addition to the special education content courses, the 36 credit Masters Degree program includes nine credits in bilingual education and six credits in urban education. Extensive field experience is provided through two semesters of student teaching.

If these programs are to continue and expand successfully, a sincere commitment must be made by the institutions offering the programs. Lines of communication must be kept open for exchange between the leading professionals in the fields of bilingual and special education. Monies should be allotted for research, especially in the area of diagnosis, to create appropriate measurement tests relevant to the child's experiences.

The purpose and need for these kinds of programs must be presented as a viable alternative not only to the bilingual special education student, but to all special education students and to all the special educators in the field with whom the universities have close ties. In this manner, the university takes on the positive role of change agent to promote the program by helping to dispel the fear and hostility from which new and "foreign" programs often suffer. In adidtion, there must be opportunities for constant interaction between and feedback from the students involved in the program and the university's administrative and teaching staff, in order to bridge the gap between the theoretical and the real field situation.

For the ultimate success of the program, parallel commitments must be made by school districts, and through parental and community involvement.

To support the program, there is a need for qualified, professional,

bilingual personnel in the supportive services of special education.

If these issues are dealt with honestly, and directed toward the goal of having a child who can better function in our society, the integration of the fields of bilingual education and special education can be perceived as a positive and viable union.